

Mr. Chairman and members of the committee: my name is Caryl Cox. I am a Trustee from Polson SD23. I am here today to express my support for Senate Bills 69 and 70.

The revenue difference for our district between Governor Schweitzer's and Superintendent Juneau's budget proposals is \$287,712. Under the Governor's proposal, we face a \$130,000 deficit, and this does *not* include nearly \$250,000 in "discretionary" expenditures. What falls within the category of "discretionary expenditures"? Six paraprofessionals that we hired last year with funds that we knew are not sustainable, to maintain the necessary student-teacher ratio for accreditation purposes in our growing elementary grades. It was an unpleasant choice: risking accreditation because of oversized kindergarten classes, or hiring staff knowing the funds might not be available the following year to maintain those hires.

When you consider the \$250,000 of "discretionary increases" along with the \$130,000 deficit we face under Governor Schweitzer's proposal, in addition to those six paras, we face the possibility of cutting 3.5 certified staff. Clearly this reduction in staff will significantly impact class size. In addition, among other measures, we may be looking at freezing all salaries and wages. None of this is cast in stone, of course, and these are only possibilities. But we all know that cuts in classroom supplies won't balance the budget.

The last few years have been tough for our district. The PP&L contested taxes meant that we had to dip into our reserves to fund on-going operations. Our reserve funds were precariously low when PP&L finally lost their appeal and those contested taxes finally flowed back into our coffers to replenish our badly depleted reserves. Now we hear that not only may PP&L contest future taxes, but that Plum Creek may join their ranks. Our projected reserve, so important in these precarious economic times, threatens to shrink when corporations and individuals alike won't or can't pay their property taxes. So once again we look at making budget cuts as I have already described, and we continue to keep maintenance projects on the shelf because we can't afford them, making their likely cost even greater as old school buildings continue to deteriorate. And do we dare propose a levy to help us cover some of these costs in this economic climate? I believe not.

The state *must* promote greater equity in school funding across the state by assuming a greater share of the costs of educating our children. I respectfully urge you to support these two important bills.

Thank you for taking the time to hear me today.